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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: NATIONAL ELECTION PRIMER

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¶1. (U) Summary: India will hold national elections in five stages from April 16 to May 13. Results will be announced on May 16. With an electorate of 714 million, the election will be the largest democratic undertaking in world history. Neither of the two largest parties, the currently ruling Congress Party nor the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are likely to achieve a majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house), thus ensuring another coalition government. After results are announced, the parties will have approximately two weeks to negotiate and form a new government, as the new parliament must be seated by June 2. Predicting elections in India is notoriously difficult, especially given the rise of regional parties that act as "free agents" willing to partner with either the Congress Party or the BJP. While there may be more than a dozen parties in the new coalition, the alignment of six to eight larger regional parties will likely determine the shape of the new government. End Summary.

Elections from April 16 to May 13

¶3. (U) The Indian Election Commission (EC) announced the 2009 Lok Sabha election schedule on March 2 (reftel). Polling will take place for 543 seats in five phases with a gap of a week between each polling phase. The model Election Code of Conduct, which regulates the activities of parties, candidates and governments during the election campaign, came into immediate effect on March 2. State assembly elections that are due in Sikkim, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh will take place simultaneously with parliamentary elections in these states.

¶4. (U) India comprises twenty-eight states and seven union territories (smaller geographical entities that have independent administrations which report to Delhi). The parliamentary schedule for the 12 largest Indian states is as follows:

Uttar Pradesh: 80 seats; April 16, 23, 30, May 7, 13
Maharashtra: 48 seats; April 16, 23, 30
West Bengal: 42 seats; April 30, May 7, 13
Andhra Pradesh: 40 seats; April 16, 23
Tamil Nadu: 39 seats; May 13
Bihar: 34 seats; April 16, 23, 30, May 7
Madhya Pradesh: 28 seats; April 23, 30
Gujarat: 25 seats; April 30
Rajasthan: 24 seats; May 7
Karnataka: 23 seats; April 23, 30
Kerala: 20 seats; April 16
Orissa: 20 seats; April 16, 23

The Largest Election in World History

¶5. (U) India's national elections take place on a colossal scale. In 2009, several thousand candidates will compete for votes from 714 million eligible voters. Turnout for national and state election is generally high in India; averages are in the 60 percent range and highs can touch 80 percent in some areas. Turnout tends to be higher in rural areas and among lower income groups. For the 2009 elections, there will be 1.1 million electronic voting machines stationed at over 800,000 polling booths. Voting takes place across widely varying geographic and climatic zones, often in exceptionally remote and difficult-to-access regions of the country. Pursuant to Indian law, one polling booth in Gujarat will be established for one lone eligible voter in an isolated part of the state. Several polling stations in Arunachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh will have less than five

NEW DELHI 00000403 002 OF 004

eligible voters. Four million civil servants will administer the election while 2.1 million security personnel will try to ensure orderly and peaceful polling. In the 2004 national election, 1,351 candidates from six national parties, 801 candidates from thirty-six state and regional parties, and over 3,000 independent candidates vied for the votes of a registered electorate of over 670 million.

Parliamentary Democracy

¶6. (U) India is a constitutional democracy with a Westminster-style parliamentary system. The Parliament consists of the President, the 543 seat Lok Sabha (House of the People - lower house) and the 250 seat Rajya Sabha (Council of States - upper house). The President is the head of state and appoints the Prime Minister (PM), who in turn runs the government with his Cabinet. The Lok Sabha has a five-year term while the Rajya Sabha is continuous and cannot be dissolved. Lok Sabha members are directly elected by the electorate of their constituencies. Winners are selected on a first-past-the-post basis -- there are no runoffs. To be elected to the Lok Sabha, a candidate must be an Indian citizen and at least 25 years of age. Rajya Sabha members are elected to six-year terms by the state legislatures of their states through a proportional representation system with preferential voting. Historically, the PM has been the leader of the majority party in Lok Sabha. However, coalition politics in the 1990s resulted in several PMs who belonged to small parties. The current PM is a member of the Rajya Sabha rather than the Lok Sabha. In the last two decades, no single party has achieved the 273 seats necessary to form a majority in the Lok Sabha. Consequently, multi-party coalitions have been required to govern.

¶7. (SBU) An independent Delimitation Commission, established periodically by the GOI under the Delimitation Act of India, determines the size and shape of parliamentary constituencies, and aims to create constituencies with roughly equal populations. The 2002 Delimitation Commission completed its work in 2007, revising the boundaries of 499 out of the existing 543 election districts based on the 2001 census. The changes in boundaries were quite significant

because, for political reasons, there had been a gap of 30 years between redrawing of boundaries -- the preceding Delimitation Commission was constituted in 1973 to redraw boundaries based on the 1971 census. The long interval had resulted in wide variations between the population sizes of election districts, with some as small as 50,000 and others as large as three million. Due to steady urbanization in India over the last three decades, the work of the 2002 Delimitation Commission has strengthened the representation of urban areas relative to rural areas in parliament and in state legislatures. The mandate of the Delimitation Commission was limited to revision of constituencies within states. It was not authorized to adjust representation of individual states in parliament. As a result, due to differential population growth rates in preceding decades, southern states today enjoy greater representation in the Lok Sabha than their population size merits, relative to northern states.

¶8. (U) The Indian Constitution ensures representation of those castes and tribes which have been formally determined to be historically disadvantaged. For the 2009 Lok Sabha election, 84 seats are reserved for candidates belonging to the scheduled castes and 47 for those from the scheduled tribes. Two seats are reserved for members of the Anglo-Indian community. Religion and gender are not taken into account in setting aside seats in the Lok Sabha.

Parties and Key Figures

NEW DELHI 00000403 003 OF 004

¶9. (U) Currently, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition governs with the support of several smaller parties, some of which support the UPA but are not part of the government and are officially "outside" the UPA. The Congress Party holds the most seats in the Lok Sabha (150). Dr. Manmohan Singh serves as Prime Minister while Sonia Gandhi serves as both the Congress Party President and UPA Chairperson.

¶10. (U) The Hindu nationalist BJP, which ruled from 1999-2004 under the leadership of PM A.B. Vajpayee, leads the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The BJP currently has 113 seats in the Lok Sabha. Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani is the BJP's declared candidate for Prime Minister for the 2009 elections. Several smaller like-minded parties comprise the NDA.

¶11. (U) The Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) and its General Secretary, Prakash Karat, leads a coalition of leftist parties referred to as the Left Front. With 59 seats in the Lok Sabha, the Left Front supported the UPA from the outside from 2004 to 2008. However, it withdrew support from the UPA over the Indo-U.S. Civil Nuclear Initiative, thereby triggering the dramatic July 2008 confidence vote in parliament, in which a dramatic switch by a regional party (Samajwadi Party) prevented the UPA government from collapsing.

¶12. (U) Support for both the Congress Party and the BJP has deteriorated in recent elections with the rise of regional (often one state) parties, usually built around a single personality. Many of these regional parties are non-ideological and therefore act as "free agents" willing to align with whichever coalition partner gives them the best deal. As few as ten Lok Sabha seats will put a smaller party in an advantageous negotiating position. Due to the fractured nature of Indian politics, one or more of these regional party leaders (many of whom harbor their own PM ambitions) will likely play kingmaker. Examples include:

- Mayawati of the Uttar Pradesh-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)
- Mulayam Singh Yadav and Amar Singh of the Uttar

Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party (SP)
-- Lalu Prasad Yadav of the Bihar-based Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD)
-- Nitish Kumar of the Bihar-based Janata Dal (United) (JDU)
-- Karunanidhi of the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)
-- Jayalalitha of the Tamil Nadu-based All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)
-- Chandrababu Naidu of the Andhra Pradesh-based Telegu Desam Party (TDP)
-- Sharad Pawar of the Maharashtra-based Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)

Comment: Current Political Climate

¶13. (SBU) Though political parties operate in permanent campaign mode, the Election Commission's March 2 announcement marked the official beginning of the 2009 contest. This will not be one national election but at least thirty-five regional elections - one for each state or territory -- because politics in India is truly local. Voters cast their ballots on the basis of a host of local development development issues, including roads, water and electricity. In addition, caste and identity combinations remain vitally important to party candidate selection and voting patterns. Anti-incumbency has for long been a significant factor in Indian politics, with voters routinely ousting ruling governments. In recent years, governance has begun to assume

NEW DELHI 00000403 004 OF 004

greater importance as voters have reelected ruling governments in some states where incumbents have provided good governance and effective delivery of services. To the extent that national issues play any role in election campaigns in India, the economy and terrorism are perennial issues. At the moment, inflation has ebbed and the Congress Party's actions after the Mumbai attacks -- moving P. Chidambaram to Home Minister, new anti-terror legislation, tough talk towards Pakistan -- have weakened the BJP's "soft on terror" criticisms.

¶14. (SBU) The Congress Party and the BJP remain locked in negotiations with regional parties for their support. Fully understanding their outsized power relative to their size, the regional parties are driving hard bargains and playing the two national parties off each other. The Congress Party appears to be in a slightly better position in signing up coalition partners at the moment, but several of its key UPA allies seem to be on weaker ground on their home turf than important BJP allies. The BJP has suffered a few embarrassingly public leadership squabbles lately, but the main NDA allies remain committed to Advani as their PM candidate. The party, however, is struggling to connect the 81 year-old Advani to the young Indian electorate. While PM Singh is nearing eighty himself, the Congress Party has a clutch of younger, media-darling MPs, chief among them Sonia Gandhi's son, Rahul Gandhi.

¶15. (SBU) Due to the fragmented nature of the politics in India and the preeminence of local issues and identity politics, predicting Indian elections is a fool's errand. Polls exist, but have proved notoriously inaccurate in the past, especially with regard to the issues and preferences of rural Indians. We may not know the shape of the new government even after the results are announced on May 16, as the many regional parties will likely jockey between the UPA and NDA looking for the best deal until the last possible moment. Five possible scenarios, in no particular order, are:

- Congress-led coalition, resembling the current UPA;
- Congress-led coalition, with communist support and resembling the 2004-2008 UPA;
- BJP-led coalition, resembling the 1999-2004 NDA;
- Third Front government comprised of several regional parties, supported by the Communists and either the BJP or

the Congress Party;

-- Hung parliament and reelection because no combination of parties is able to form a viable government

¶16. (SBU) For U.S.-India relations to flourish, it is important that whatever coalition emerges after the election, it be a stable one with firm, clear leadership. There would be some measure of political paralysis with a precarious and unstable government that is constantly looking over its shoulder and fighting for its survival. This would reduce the likelihood of the bold decision-making that is needed to move the bilateral relationship to the next level.

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